

Recession-Proof Your Marriage

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Is this conversation familiar to you: “Uh oh! That’s how much we have left!?!” Well, thanks to the credit crunch, dewindling portfolios and the shell-shocked real estate market, many Atlantans are panicked and stressed.

Take a deep breath and switch your thinking from a “woe is me” to a more productive “What am I going to do?”. And one thing you can do is safeguard your marriage. I want to give you three ways to do that. According to various surveys by the American Psychological Association on stress, money, and marriage, we know that during a struggling economy, marriages take a damaging blow. In fact, financial issues continue to rank as one of the top reasons that couples get divorced along with abuse and infidelity. It’s easy to understand how money problems lead to a very unstable marriage. Couples are often times pointing the finger at one another rather than partnering to combat the problems together as a unified team.

I recently became aware of the term, “war budget”, during a conversation with a Buckhead “uber-mom” as she remarked on a dialogue with her friends commiserating about the effects of the economy’s downturn in their marriages. Due to a drop in revenue

or the threat thereof, these wives are experiencing a dramatic shift in how their husbands are handling the family’s financial spending practices. Apparently, these wives have been placed on a “war budget”--- an abruptly adjusted lifestyle to match an abruptly adjusted financial situation. And although the shift from unaccounted monthly spending to the proper balancing of a conservative budget are smart actions to steward the family’s resources, the problem exists in the way the adjustment occurs. Both spouses can feel unjustly accused, second-guessed, and devalued in the way these budget adjustments are decided.

So, what can you do to help safeguard your marriage during an economic crisis?

- **1 - Communicate Openly**

It’s easy to respond to stress by becoming anxious and just burying your head in the sand. However, that only makes things worse. The more secretive you are about your financial position, the more stress you experience in the relationship making it harder to connect.

Open up to your partner and share your concerns, fears, and worries. What keeps people from having these vulnerable conversations is a fear that their partner will be



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upset and disappointed in them for allegedly getting them in this situation. Therefore, you both need to view the conflict as an opportunity to connect with rather than push away from your spouse.

- **2 - Connect in Conflict**

Couples who empower one another approach their problems together as teammates facing the issue rather than seeing the other person as the problem. In my experience as a marriage and family therapist, I see partners actually draw closer when their spouses share personal fears and concerns rather than blaming criticisms and what I call “shoulding-on” their spouses. (e.g. “You shouldn’t be spending money on...” or “You should start prioritizing your money by...”). When you “should” on your spouse, you actually trigger your spouse’s defensiveness because he or she feels attacked, blamed, and criticized which results in either an attack back or a shut down and retreat. Therefore, cultivate an atmosphere of value and respect for your spouse during conflict by seeking to understand one another’s perspective on the issue rather than coming in with “guns a blazing”.

- **3 -Celebrate Strengths**

Marriage research guru Dr. John Gottman believes that happy marriages are based on deep friendship overflowing with mutual respect and enjoyment of each other. In his book *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman suggests that “friendship fuels the flames of romance” because it protects against feeling adversarial toward one’s spouse. Many happy couples fluidly move into constant bragging on each other’s talents and admired personal characteristics. So, as you and your spouse share your fears with each other about your current financial situation and team up against the issue, you will be able to celebrate each other’s strengths and share those affirmations with each other. When a couple truly finds enjoyment in each other, they are able to invoke a flirty nature to their connection. Gottman calls this type of connection “marital harmony”. Take some time this week to catch your spouse doing something well and celebrate that!

For a confidential consultation, call us at LifeGate at (404) 842-3150 to help you navigate this difficult time of change.

